



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

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Mayor Harry A. Watson, Councilors Heather Sherman Bond, Kathryn M. Brown-Tracy, Catherine Kolnaski, Deborah B. Monteiro, Frank O'Beirne, Jr., Rita M. Schmidt, Paulann H. Sheets, and James L. Streeter

Tuesday, March 17, 2009

7:30 AM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

SPECIAL MEETING

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Watson called the meeting to order at 7:35 a.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Watson, Councilor Brown-Tracy, Councilor Kolnaski, Councilor Monteiro, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., Councilor Schmidt and Councilor Streeter
Members Absent: Councilor Bond and Councilor Sheets

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Assistant to the Town Manager Lee Vincent and Executive Assistant Nicki Bresnayan.

Legislators: Senator Maynard, Representative Moukawsher, and Representative Wright

3. Approval of Minutes

2009-0077 Approval of Corrected Minutes (Committee of the Whole)

RESOLUTION ACCEPTING CORRECTED COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE MINUTES

RESOLVED, that the minutes of the Town Council Committee of the Whole meeting of February 10, 2009 as corrected are hereby accepted and approved.

A motion was made by Councilor Monteiro, seconded by Councilor Streeter, to adopt.

The motion carried unanimously

4. NEW BUSINESS

2009-0009 Legislative Policy (2009 Standing Referral)

Discussed

Senator Maynard and Representative Moukawsher addressed the current year deficit mitigation efforts. One more plan is expected for review. The last plan was based on some actions to be taken by the Governor that have not happened yet. Representative Moukawsher noted that the rainy day fund is available to fill remaining gaps. In addition, there may be some federal funds available for the current year, but the criteria for use are unclear. The state is trying to hold the line on current year funding for municipalities.

Councilor O'Beirne asked if there is any urgency in Hartford to adopt a budget. Senator Maynard noted that committee schedules have been moved up. Representative Moukawsher talked about needing to get on the same page with the Governor relative to actual numbers.

Senator Maynard noted that there will be an issue with Education Cost Sharing (ECS) as a result of the Sheff decision. At this time, a 1.7% across the board decrease in ECS funding for municipalities is anticipated for next year.

Senator Maynard emphasized that legislators have very little impact on actual budget negotiations. The committees make recommendations, but ultimately the Governor and leadership decide on the budget that is presented at the end of May.

Representative Moukawsher noted that the deficit is so large, people are in denial. Senator Maynard agreed that municipalities should prepare for serious cuts. Representative Wright indicated that legislators will have a better idea what the revenues will be after April 15th.

Town Manager Oefinger indicated he is looking for some sense that the Governor and leadership are committed to having a budget out in early May. Representative Moukawsher is working toward a goal of April 2nd for the budget to come out of appropriations. He indicated that he will keep in touch with the Town as the process moves forward, and noted that will probably be some recommendations for tax increases.

Representative Moukawsher suggested that another way to close the gap is by extending the obligation to pay tax to people who are not currently paying. Eliminating sales tax exemptions would reduce the sales tax from 6% to 3%. The state could then raise the sales tax to 5% to raise more revenues. Representative Wright noted that state also needs to look at a use tax on internet purchases. Representative Moukawsher suggested that it may be time to consider a progressive income tax again.

Town Manager Oefinger reviewed Town budget deadlines for the legislators.

Councilor Monteiro suggested that the state must allow towns to find additional forms of revenue. Discussion followed on local tax options and retaining a greater percentage of fines and licensing fees locally.

Councilor Kolnaski questioned the status of reintroducing tolls to Connecticut. Representative Moukawsher noted that the Transportation Safety Board just issued a report on the subject. Senator Maynard indicated that there are still questions to be answered such as the tradeoff in federal dollars and cost to maintain the system.

Councilor Monteiro expressed support for the Mystic River speed limit legislation. Senator Maynard stated he was initially wary of the proposed legislation, but he now agrees it is a public safety issues that needs to be addressed. He explained that the only change to the legislation is expanding the covered area to the mouth of the river and eliminating areas of exemption. Senator Maynard feels that ultimately this issue should be addressed by DEP regulations rather than state legislation.

Senator Maynard then addressed the Marine Magnet School. He noted that he will be introducing legislation to address a DEP requirement so that the Thomas Road site can be used by the Magnet School or some other future use.

Councilor Schmidt questioned mandate curtailment. Representative Moukawsher noted this issue has been discussed and there is general agreement that something must be done. There are new mandates that are obvious targets, but it is unknown what other specifics are being discussed by various committees. Representative Moukawsher noted that there is a strong labor element in leadership so practically, the state will not get rid of binding arbitration. At this point, individual towns are working with their unions. Discussion followed on state labor negotiations. The governor is currently working with the unions, but if negotiations are not advancing, the legislature will get involved.

Town Manager Oefinger raised the issue of Steamboat Wharf dredging. He provided a history of the issue that centers on dredging a small inlet of the Mystic River. The site was historically dredged by DOT, but then DOT refused to participate in the DEP permitting process. The Town stepped in and secured the permit and unsuccessfully attempted the dredging using alternate means. Funds for the project have been appropriated over the years.

At this point, DOT has indicated they will participate in the dredging one last time, but the Town must sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to that effect. This issue has led to delays in the Mystic Streetscape project.

The Town Manager explained that the drainage pipes leading to this area of the Mystic River primarily serve Water Street and Route 1. The Town is willing to participate in the project, but the Town Manager will not sign an MOU. Going forward, this situation should be helped by the fact that neither the Town nor the state use sand anymore. In addition, catch basin improvements and a plan for annual maintenance at the pipe will keep this from becoming a large project in the future.

The next issue discussed was the Mystic Education Center. The Town Manager suggested there should be a long range plan for the facility so that the Town is not always reacting negatively to some proposal by the state. Also, the Town does not want to see the facility deteriorate to the point where it is a liability rather than an asset.

Representative Moukawsher returned to budget issues. He assured the Council that he will push for the ability for towns to recover funds if PILOTs or MM&E are cut.

Representative Wright mentioned that there is a bill pending to allow towns to attach a surcharge to fees. Representative Moukawsher noted there is a conveyance tax proposed for homebuyers to provide open space funds.

5. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:10 a.m.